

## Part Three

# ***THE BLACK HILLS AS A FOOD PACK AND A SAFE***

*... I heard Sitting Bull say the Black Hills was just like a food pack and therefore the Indians should stick to it. At that time I just wondered about what he had said and I knew what he meant after thinking it over because I knew that the Black Hills were full of fish, animals, and lots of water, and I just felt that we Indians should stick to it. Indians would rove all around, but when they were in need of something, they could just go in there and get it (Henry Standing Bear in DeMallie 1984:163-164).*

*...Our Great Father has a big safe, and so have we. This hill is our safe. That is why we can't come to a conclusion very quick...(Spotted Bear in Allison 1875:188).*

Before the Lakotas and Cheyennes were removed from the Black Hills, these mountains were considered to be their food reserve. The Lakotas euphemistically called them their “meat pack,” *oiyhpeye talo* (Hassrick 1964:75,165; Utley 1993:115). In 1875, during deliberations with members of the Allison Commission over the sale of the Black Hills, Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho leaders would echo Spotted Bear’s words that the Hills played a central role in the provisioning of their peoples. As Dead Eyes (in Allison 1875:189) put it, “it is not a very small thing to take the whole of our safe.” In later years, Henry Standing Bear, quoted above, and other Lakotas as well as Cheyennes would recall the importance of the Hills to their former livelihoods (Hyde 1961:20; Grinnell 1972:1:277, 278; Marquis and Limbaugh 1973:27; Powell 1981:1:112). In conversations with John G. Neihardt in the 1930s, Iron Hawk (in DeMallie 1984:171-172) reiterated the same sentiment, when he said:

Sitting Bull said: ‘How! Brother, it is well that you have said that; these hills are a treasure to us Indians. That is the food pack of the people and when the poor having nothing to eat we can all go there and have something to eat, and it is well that you have said this.

Many years later on March 6, 1966 Joseph Black Elk (in Edward and Mabel Kadleeck 1981:81) had this to say:

In the center of this vast country the mystic Black Hills were the thriving hunting grounds of the Sioux, where the deer, elk, antelope, and buffalo nibbled the sweet mountain grass, watering on the streams of water that ran noisily down through the high walled canyons, with colored cliffs sheltering the valleys. They said animals were the Sioux supermarket, on the hoof, furnishing them with food, clothing, shelter, and even medicine.

When oral histories were collected by the American Indian Oral History Project at the University of South Dakota, Moses Circle Bear (1971:14) remembered how the elders spoke about the Hills as a place they could always find food because it never failed the people.

Many of the region's early traders and explorers also recognized the Hills as a primary location for the Lakotas and the Cheyennes to procure their livelihood. Antoine Tabeau (in Abel 1939), Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (in Moulton 1983:3:482), Maxmilian, Prince of Wied (in Thwaites 1966:2:246, 346-347), and Edwin Denig (in Ewers 1961:16), among others, recognized their importance to the subsistence of the tribal nations in the region. Later, U.S. government officials, military personnel, and journalists would also remark on their value to local tribes (Twiss 1856b:95; Hayden 1862a, 1862b; Edmonds, Guernsey, and Reed 1866:168; Knappen in Krause and Olson 1974:28; Donaldson in Krause and Olson 1974:69). From his experience on the Black Hills Expedition, newspaper correspondent, William Curtis (in Krause and Olson 1974:149) wrote on July 13, 1874 in the *New York World*:

The Black Hills enclose what may be called the earthly paradise of the Sioux, and from the mingled influences of superstition and selfishness they have guarded it with the utmost jealousy. The abundance of game is insisted upon by all competent witnesses. Bears, panthers, antelope, elk, deer, and of fish there are many. It is this quantity of game which I think, after due examination of all the facts of the case, induces the Sioux so highly to prize and jealously guard the Black Hills. They sacredly preserve the game found within their boundaries so making of the country a combined deer park and Mecca.

Even observers, like Lt. Richard Dodge, who otherwise denied the Lakota's use of the area, described the Hills as the Lakotas' "nursery for game & a fine one it is." Two early settlers, Jeesse Brown and A.M. Willards (1924:16), wrote: "This region has long been the favorite hunting ground of the Indians where they always find plenty of game," and Annie Tallent (1899), the indefatigable pioneer of white settlement in the Hills, entitled her famous book, *The Black Hills and The Last Hunting Ground of the Dacotahs*.

In historic times, the Black Hills represented a veritable storehouse of animals, plants, and minerals. Local tribes drew on these resources in different ways and degrees, but one thing is clear: the Black Hills were well known as an important and highly valued location for various kinds of resource procurement. Although one important species, the bison, abandoned the Hills after the 1860s, others remained abundant enough to provision local tribes. Even after tribal title to the Hills was extinguished in 1877, Native people continued to return to the area to hunt and find plants, stones, and other resources important to their daily needs and spiritual well-being, and they continue to do so to the present day.

After European American explorers and settlers arrived in the area, they discovered the abundance of the Hills' various natural resources, and they quickly grasped the economic opportunities offered by their vast mineral, grass, and timber reserves. By imposing new forms of relationship to the land, European Americans dramatically altered the region's fauna and flora. By the early decades of the twentieth century, some species were extirpated from the area and others were substantially reduced, but many remained relatively untouched in the face of new patterns of extraction and use.

Today, the Hills remain the location of more than one-thousand different plants, over three hundred species of animals, and countless rocks and minerals. It is a unique region not only because of the varieties of its life forms, but also because it is a location where various eastern and western species meet and reach their farthest geographic reach. It is also a place where

species typically associated with northern boreal environments occur as isolates and where species commonly found in more southerly locales reach their northern limits. As Sven Froiland (1978:78) writes:

Here several biomes meet and overlap...a Cordilleran element, the Great Plains element, the Northern Coniferous element, and the eastern Deciduous Forest element. This overlapping of ranges of organisms belonging to several different geographic elements has resulted in the creation of a “whirlpool effect” of distributions involving many taxonomic groups, both plant and animal.

The Black Hills’ unique and diverse biological features did not go unnoticed by the tribal nations who lived and traveled in their midst. In most tribal perspectives, the abundance, uniqueness, and diversity of the Hills’ life forms were a telling testimony of their importance and sacredness. Indeed, the two went together in the sense that the region’s geological/biological complexity was embedded in, constituted by, created for, and a sign of their spiritual power.

While the Hills as a whole have long been acknowledged as a primary area for various kinds of tribal procurement activity, the region where Wind Cave National Park now stands occupied a very special place in the relationship of local tribal nations to the Black Hills. The area of Wind Cave National Park has long held sacred significance to the Lakotas, Cheyennes, and probably the Arapahoes too.<sup>1</sup> In Lakota beliefs, the area inside the Buffalo Gap is the winter home of the buffalo and other game animals, and Wind Cave the birthplace and origin site of humans and the *Pte Oyate* [Buffalo Nation]. Wind Cave is also associated with *Tate*, the Wind, and his five sons, the Four Winds and the Whirlwind, and as such, it has a special bearing on the origins of movement, hunting, and also plants used in herbal medicine. For both tribal nations, this area is the location where a great race took place in cosmic time that determined the nature of human-animal relationships and where the buffalo first performed the Sun Dance. The importance of this area as a sacred landscape is discussed in greater detail in Section Four. In order to understand the sacredness of the area, it is necessary to give some attention to the practical and spiritual aspects of the life forms located in the area of Wind Cave National Park that were and have remained so pivotal to the Lakotas, Cheyennes, and Arapahos’ sense of this place in their universe, and more specifically, in defining their own relationship to the Black Hills. The discussions that follow focus largely on the traditional cultural contexts, uses, and meanings of faunal, floral, and mineral resources located in this area. They give attention primarily to the tribal nations known to have lived here in the nineteenth century, but some consideration is also paid to the cultural interests of the European American peoples who lived in the area in later times.

---

<sup>1</sup> Again, little about this region’s cultural significance to the Arapaho peoples has been recorded in published accounts of their oral/written traditions.